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ABSTRACT

This document presents a survey of Dutch preschools, the Kleuterschools, and research projects in early childhood education. A brief background on the Kleuterschool is included. Both private and public schools are totally funded by the national government. Although it is not compulsory, most 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds attend preschool. The philosophy of these schools is quite eclectic combining the methods of Froebel, Decroly and using some Montessori materials. In addition, Russian psychology has had some influence on research projects. Described are a classroom day, curriculum and teacher training. The current trend is toward integration of the preprimary and primary school with a "teaching community" to avoid repetition and provide reading and mathematics for the more mature preprimary children. (MS)

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DUTCH PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: A RIGHT AND NOT A PRIVILEGE

Dorothy Sailor

It is no longer the windmill which dominates the Dutch skyline, but rather the great housing complex and in many of them, surrounded by green strips of grass, high rise apartments, and the traditional canals, are attractive modern schools. At least one of them has gaily decorated windows. Here are the Dutch children, four, five, and six years of age, at "work and play" in their kleuterschool. In some instances it shares the ground of the basis (primary) school, but often it stands alone so as to be as close as possible to the homes of the children.

Though not compulsory, preschool education is available to Dutch children as a part of the state system of education, and most parents take advantage of this opportunity. In 1970, 82% of four-year-olds, 95% of five-year-olds, and 98% of six-year-olds attended kleuterschool.

Freedom, the Key

Freedom is the fundamental concept of Dutch education. It is guaranteed in their constitution of 1815, which declares that the government shall make no laws which interfere with parental freedom to educate their children as they wish. This includes the kind of school, whether private or public, as well as the particular method of instruction. To insure this, the government pays almost 100% of the cost of private, as well as public education. Most Dutch children, in fact, attend "private" schools; in 1970, 45% attended Roman Catholic schools, 27% Protestant schools, and 7% other independent schools.

This pattern was illustrated most strikingly just a few blocks from my home in Voorschoten, near The Hague, where I was living in 1973. Of the four attractive buildings set in green play areas, one was the Bishop Bekkers Catholic

Kleuterschool, which uses the Montessori method with such additions as a doll and dress-up corner as well as a variety of art materials. The two middle buildings house an Openbare Kleuterschool, which is a public school; Openbare meaning free or unaffiliated. It provides a program in which the children are somewhat freer to explore and experiment and in which the methods of Froebel, Decroly and others appear. The fourth building is the Robbedoes Christian Kleuterschool or Protestant school. Here the older children especially, use much Dutch manufactured material for the teaching of reading and mathematics. Their music contains a good portion of church songs and the musical activities, like the program, in general, are directed by the teacher.

Providing education for preschoolers is anything but a new idea for the Dutch. It dates back to 1240 when Roman Catholic nuns established the first Begijneschool. Around 1800 Bewaarschools or "Minding Schools" were formed and along with these came more Begijneschools now referred to as "Keeping Schools". With the coming of the Reformation, Protestants established their own "Keeping Schools" known as Matressenschools. Located mainly in working-class areas where mothers needed all-day care for their children, all three types of schools were centrally concerned with the health and the discipline of the children. Poor families paid nothing for such schooling, more affluent families sometimes paid quite a lot, but rich or poor alike took increasing advantage of these schools.

These early "keeping and minding" schools were poorly supervised by elementary school inspectors. The quality of teaching and their physical conditions became so bad by the late 1800's that local physicians successfully proposed to upgrade the situation. Efforts to improve the quality of education for young children gathered force under the influence of the teachings of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) who instituted the kindergarten movement. His

purpose was to foster the innate potentialities of young children in their first encounter with formal education and not just to emphasize religious and moral discipline; we in the United States tend to regard these kindergartens as the forerunners of our modern preschools. Froebel believed that free creative activity is the end as well as the means of education, especially for the young child, though Dutch educators also note his use of cubes and other geometrical forms to teach arithmetical concepts. Somewhat later, Ovide Decroly (1871-1932) left a permanent effect on kleuterschool education with his project-oriented philosophy. Dutch children, for example, visit a dairy and then return to their school for activities centered in this experience, and one can still see "centers of interest" in kleuterschools and children sorting and classifying objects somewhat according to his theoretical approach. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) brought her teachings personally to the Netherlands before World War I, and they were carried on during her absence in the war years though she returned to find the Dutch more structured than she in their Montessori methods. Her continuing influence there is suggested by the Montessori factory in Zelhem, which supplies the great bulk of Montessori materials used around the world. One cannot help but be impressed by the careful handcrafting of these materials. Many other theorists such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Steiner, Susan and Nathan Issac, Anna Freud, Dewey and Piaget have played a role, but the influence of Froebel still dominates the traditional kleuterschools.

Total Public Support

Before 1956, the Dutch central government in The Hague was the only one in Europe which did not contribute to preschool education, leaving the responsibility to local authorities. This permitted such wide discrepancies

in instruction and facilities that in 1956 the present "Kleuterschool Act" was put into effect. Due to its provisions, the Dutch government is now the only one in Europe which guarantees the payment of all costs of both public and independent kleuterschools which meet minimum legal requirements. It provides that when 30, 60, or 90 parents, depending on the size of the community, have fulfilled those requirements, they may request a particular type of kleuterschool for their children and state funds will be made available. This act further determines the requirements of the physical plant, the qualifications of the teachers, and the age of the children attending.

Kleuterschool teachers receive a highly specialized training so that even primary school teachers are disqualified from such positions. However, the more than one hundred training institutions vary widely as to their basic orientation, religious or philosophical, as well as in their methodological approach. Accordingly, trainees emerge with quite diverse pedagogical styles. Before acceptance by the training schools, a candidate must have completed six years of primary and four years of general secondary education. During their three-year training course, students average eight hours a week in a kleuterschool under the supervision of both a kleuterschool and a training school teacher. Their course of study includes a minimum requirement of fifteen fifty-minute weekly periods in psychology and in teaching methods. They study general psychology, child psychology and the psychology of personality. Other courses include child care, hygiene (including first aid), biology, civics, Dutch language and literature, oral and instrumental music, drawing, creative methods and materials, physical education emphasizing the acquisition of skills needed in working with children, and study of the relationship between family and school. Not only is English language studied but one finds that most kleuterschool teachers are proficient in it.

Children may attend kleuterschool beginning on their fourth birthday and remain until they are six years eight months or younger depending on the date of birth. This may mean almost a year's difference in the ages of some of the children in the first primary class. Upon the advice of a physician or a psychologist, a child may delay entrance into primary school until the age of eight. The cost to parents for kleuterschool education in a nominal four guilders or approximately $1.35 per month. There may be small voluntary contributions such as for milk or flower fund.

The children attend school on four days for five hours with a two-hour mid-day break. On Wednesdays, they go home at noon. Most children remain all day though they are free to stay home in the afternoons. They may be separated into age groups especially when there are sufficient children for two or more teachers. Some teachers perfer to keep the children in a single group, permitting each child to find his own level. The pupil-teacher ratio has been reduced from 34:1 in 1966 to 31:1 in 1971. The Dutch realize that this is still too high and hope to achieve a ratio of 28 to 1 in the near future.

Some schools near training colleges have student teachers for one or two days a week. Still fewer schools have mothers helping during the school day though Dutch educators have been reluctant to include them, feeling the threat of interference and believing that education is best left to the professional. Nevertheless, there is a movement among some groups of mothers to become more involved in their children's classroom. In fact, parent committees are required by law for all public schools to serve as a bridge between teacher and school on the one hand and the school board on the other. Many private schools have such committees though parents are usually represented on their school boards. Most kleuterschools do have parent evenings either to give information or even to

let the parents experience a lesson or task similar to one the children have.

Lofty Goals, Varied Methods

Though the basic aim of preschool education in The Netherlands is purported to foster the social and emotional as well as cognitive and physical development of their children, the main emphasis is on the latter. Indeed, indications of concern for the improvement of self-image and for a healthier emotional life are conspicuously lacking in their curricula and research. There is a wide range of views on the teaching of moral and ethical principles, but all seem to agree that the child should at least be taught good manners. A government document entitled Educational Policy and Planning in The Netherlands (1967) states that the first goal is "to develop positive moral and civic values and cultural attitudes among all the people, and to provide them with the skills necessary for self-fulfillment, so that they may appreciate and contribute to the cultural experience of society." The third goal, so important to kleuters, is "to provide adequate education for all individuals and groups to the highest levels they demand."

One encounters great variety in working methods, though the government, through its Ministry of Education, does maintain certain stipulations and makes available a great deal of information and guidance for its teachers. Schools must file a copy of their daily plans with the Ministry and these are subject to its approval. Private schools must only submit plans; to require approval would threaten the cherished right to personal belief. Nonreligious schools are subject to government inspectors but religious schools are supervised by parent committees and regional inspectors, with only a limited and very general supervision by the Ministry, usually on the level of such matters as sanitary conditions. Public kleuterschools are visited by government inspectors

periodically; The Netherlands has two head inspectors for them and twenty-eight inspectors and inspectresses.

The majority of kleuterschool directors believe that they should conduct a loosely structured, free and spontaneous kind of program, one based essentially on another of Froebel's beliefs that the child will grow and develop best through sensory experience in interaction with other children, but in practice they will often incorporate Decroly's project-orientated methods as well as using some Montessori material. The small number of schools used as testing grounds for research projects tend toward a more structured approach, introducing reading and sometimes mathematics to older kleuters who are judged to be ready.

A small minority of schools (less than 5%) follow the well defined principles of Maria Montessori and are located mainly in the large cities. Fifteen of Amsterdam's 208 kleuterschools, for example, are Montessori-based with five more sections of that kind being attached to other schools. Even in this instance, however, one finds additional activities in their programs to varying degrees, again demonstrating the Dutch desire for independence. Rudolph Steiner's theories based on the writings of the poet, Goethe, are followed in a small but growing number of schools. A very few schools operate under the so called Jenaplan according to the principles of Peter Peterson. These vaguely resemble what in the United States are called Open Schools.

The Daily Program

Educational opportunities do vary significantly for Dutch children, but in the daily plans for most schools there is a time for stories, art and music. Since teachers graduate from training school with their own set of marionettes,

storytelling includes the use of puppets or marionettes often on Friday afternoons. The shows are usually staged for the children rather than by them. The range of art media and ways of using it vary, but children are usually given a choice or rotated so that during the week they will experience all of the media provided. Music includes singing, use of rhythm instruments, and dramatic action songs in which the children may move like windmills, fly like birds--or sit on eggs. Again the freedom to decide what and how to express aesthetic feelings differs with the philosophy of the school.

Gymnastics are required by the government and children use walking boards for balancing, or sometimes use bean bags on various parts of their body while running, skipping, walking, or in many other movements. Exercises are usually done in their underclothes and bare feet. It is quite impressive to see thirty children dress themselves, helping each other, and even tying sashes and shoelaces. Juice, milk or a nutritious snack usually follows. Outdoor play is stressed whenever weather permits and large motor skills are cultivated both in and out of doors.

There is a time for children to use special material for cognitive development as well as manipulative skills. Perceptual training is considered important. Children are exposed to the world of nature in a variety of ways. Many schools have pets. The Dutch love of flowers means that gardens and window pots are everywhere. One school turned a large sink in the corridor into a terrarium. Water, sand and clay are readily available.

The daily plans for most schools involve group activities though the Montessori schools stress the individual completion of tasks using the Montessori materials.

Dutch Head Start

There are a small number of compensatory education programs, stimulated by the Head Start Program, which are conducted in both primary and preprimary schools. As in their American counterpart, a major goal is to improve the language skills of the children of lower socio-economic families and the programs are frequently the basis for research projects some of which will be discussed later. These programs however, are generally regarded as failures by kleuterschool leaders because the overall gains in reading have been small and shortlived and gains in I.Q. have been negligible. It is interesting to note that Sesame Street, which was designed for "disadvantaged children", was sharply rejected last year by the Dutch.

Facilities for Younger Children

Peuter (children ages two to four) education is available on a limited basis. Since 1968 the Netherlands Association of Women Graduates or University Women have been establishing play rooms which are open three mornings a week. In some instances, three-year-olds in big cities are placed in subsidized nurseries sponsored by various societies and further subsidized by the Ministry of Culture, Recreation, and Social Welfare. This provision is largely to help working mothers. A few play rooms have been opened in this way.

Day nurseries, called creches, are found in large cities also to care for the children of working mothers. Their availability is limited since they are not yet subsidized by the central goverrment and depend on local financing. Typically, these centers are open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. Since World War II, a few special nursery schools care for children aged one to four from lower socio-economic backgrounds, created particularly for children whose parents are judged to be inadequate models rather than simply working parents. They are community-financed and designated to have what the Dutch call

"psycho-hygenic" aims. There is one adult for each eight children and the school day is from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with a two hour mid-day break and Wednesday afternoons off.

Current Focus on Education

In the past decade the increasing concern with educational problems is reflected in sweeping legislation which includes impressive provision for much educational research. In 1968 a new Secondary Education Act went into effect and in 1969 a draft bill was proposed to carry out comparable reforms on the primary level. Hopefully, most of the measures will become law in the near future with their great implications for kleuter education. One of its most significant objectives is to achieve a smoother transition from kleuterschool to primary school. Primary teachers must make necessary changes in their curriculum and teaching methods to facilitate the newcomer's adjustment to primary school. Kleuterschool teachers are also under new pressure to provide a program that will give children a background in areas like reading and mathematics which often present problems early in primary school. The legislation proposes that kleuterschool teachers be given additional training, qualifying them to teach the first two years of primary school. This would affect their salary as well as the curriculum and perhaps entrance requirements of the kleuterschool teacher training institutions.

Another proposal to avoid needless repetition from kleuterschool to primary school is to integrate fully the system of schooling for children age four to twelve into what Dutch educators call a "teaching community". Its proponents place their emphasis on exposure to mathematics and reading in the later pre-primary years. Dr. Erades, director of the Haanstra Preprimary Teacher Training School in Leiden and the author of films and a book on teaching mathematics

to kleuters, feels that both mathematics and reading are learned best when the child is quite young. Just how young, he concedes, can only be determined when the overall environment is made more conducive. He and those who agree with him are convinced that such early training will greatly reduce later difficulties in those areas.

Miss R. T. Ritmeester, head inspectress for kleuterschools, along with most other educators I have interviewed, feels that this is the trend of the future. The majority of current research reports point in this direction as can be seen in a thirteen-page document published in early 1973 by the Ministry of Education which contains bibliography and lists research projects in progress in this area. Indeed, some communities have already initiated a single school system and their results are being closely watched.

Such trends are not without resistance. Miss W. M. Nijkamp, perhaps the best known authority in the kleuterschool field, believes that there are drawbacks in the formal teaching of reading and mathematics so early in a child's education. Representing the majority of kleuterschool educators, she is apprehensive that such new approaches will tend to thwart a child's learning through natural play in which he explores and experiments freely with the materials of his environment. For her, the single teaching community means the imposition of primary school philosophy on the kleuterschools though kleuters learn best in a very different way.

The Netherlands has three national pedagogical centers and thirty regional centers for educational innovation and guidance. The regional centers work directly with the schools in their areas, helping teachers with their pedagogical problems, introducing new methods and carrying out the testing of research projects. They deal with preprimary, primary and special education serving all the

schools in their areas. The national centers are divided according to religious denomination and serve all levels except the universities and some vocational education schools.

The Ministry of Education has a very active program for the encouragement of educational research and for the dissemination of its findings. It has a department of Research and Planning (Onderzoek en Planning) which in 1963, partly to avoid duplication, began the periodic publication of a "Register of Current Social Science Research" offering a brief description of projects in progress. Another source of information on such research simply labeled "Informatie" is published annually. During the year, the Ministry also publishes reports categorizing current research from around the world including work being done in The Netherlands. In 1965, the Ministry created a Foundation for Educational Research (Stichting voor Onderzoek van het Onderwijs), commonly referred to as the S. V. O., which funds projects and in turn publishes reports on its work representing about one third of all Dutch educational research. More recently the Dutch have established a National Institute for Test Development which emphasizes creativity in school programs.

Research Directions

Until recently all psychological studies in pre-primary children in The Netherlands have been descriptive, hypothetical and done through the so-called phenomenological method. Though current studies remain descriptive for the most part, much effort is now going into the development of instruments for more systematic observation. Much of this work is being done in the universities, with smaller projects being conducted at the regional pedagogical centers.

Under a S. V. O. grant in 1967, the Institute for Educational Research at the University of Utrecht has administered three types of compensatory education

research projects, one family oriented, another emphasizing school readiness and a third known widely as the Language and Thought Study. The results in the first instance showed no gain in language skills or in I.Q. scores. The latter two projects reflect the Institute's basic philosophy which is narrowly school-oriented and tends toward behavior modification techniques. In these the researchers attempt to improve the teaching of academic subjects by the introduction of reading and mathematics at an earlier age and by testing various methods for increasing the language skills which are considered to be conspicuously lacking in the homes of the disadvantaged. Through their experiments, they expect to show more effective ways to raise the level of attainment for children of all social backgrounds. In the Language and Thought Program, directed by Dr. A. K. de Vries, for example, small groups of children (six or seven at one time) participate for twenty minutes daily in a highly-structured session with the teacher. This is purely voluntary for each child. The children are then tested on their ability to organize and transmit information about things in relation to time and space. The tentative results in the ongoing project show some success, confirming these researchers in their belief that such gains are more likely to occur when teaching is specifically focused on these skills.

A group working under the direction of Dr. van Calcar in the University of Amsterdam's Research Institute for Applied Psychology, has adopted a somewhat more societal approach. Though they are hardly less concerned with language and reading skills than most other Dutch researchers, in their project entitled "Development of Compensory Early Childhood Education in Amsterdam", they do recognize that the child's total environment must be considered if permanent changes are to occur. Thus the parents of preprimary

and early primary school children in the project are fully informed of its objectives and some are directly involved in the program. Since Dr. van Calcar believes that no such experiment will be successful unless the teachers are also motivated and capable of carrying out new theories, stress is placed on inservice upgrading of teacher competence and on support while attempting new approaches. Closer ties between schools and communities are sought to facilitate emotional guidance for the children, but despite some successful test results, they feel that the same absence of such ties is the cause for poor results in Dutch compensatory education projects as well as in their American counterparts.

One of Dr. van Calcar's better known studies is the "Enschede Project" working out of the Pedagogical Institute in that community. This enrichment study involved the first grade class in 24 schools with six additional schools serving as control groups. The parents were working-class, the children had average I.Q., reading and mathematics scores. The teachers were trained in remedial reading techniques and in working with the parents who were asked to take a particular interest in their child's role in the project. Compared to the controls, 29 of the experimental groups tested higher in comprehensive reading scores and 33 of them showed higher results in technical reading.

One group of clinical psychologists is working in behavior modification. From their training centers in Groningen, Utrecht and Amsterdam, a series of their studies on systematic modification of problem behavior should appear. It is also interesting to note that the theories and enrichment program developed by Marion Blank are being evaluated by Dr. Groendal at the Pedagogical Institute in the Free University of Amsterdam.

A very interesting longitudinal study was begun in 1970 on the influence of kleuterschool education directed by Dr. G. A. Kohnstamm under the

Department of Culture and Social Work. For every child in the kleuterschool a matched control child has been found. The children are being tested with a variety of instruments, among them the Bayly Infant Scale, the Stutsman I.Q. test and a vocabulary test specially designed and standardized for this project. Results are expected soon.

As reflected in the draft Primary Education Act, the integration of kleuter with primary schools is a dominant theme in current Dutch research. A common proposal is to have both groups share the same facility under the concept of the "teaching community" and to introduce subjects like reading and mathematics to older kleuters since the conspicuous problem in their educational system is the high rate of pupil retention in the first grade due to inadequate reading skills. An outstanding example of the latter is the project involving ninety schools directed by Mr. A. G. C. Kappenburg at the Pedagogical Center in Zeeland. Strikingly similar to the Language and Thought Study at Utrecht, the core of this project is in the teaching of reading through highly structured discussions between six or seven children and a teacher using picture word cards and lasting twenty minutes daily. The results from the first year of this continuing study seem to indicate that the experimental groups do test higher in reading level and word acquisition than do the controls. Mr. Kappenburg also believes in the principle of the single facility in which kleuters and early primary pupils share many activities. He has produced a film in which a boy from one group and a girl from another are paired off or "married" for a week's experience with a supermarket. It culminates in an "open market" situation in their school where real food and money are used. It was most interesting to view the film when the excited children who had participated were themselves seeing it for the first time.

In addition to the compensatory education study mentioned earlier, Dr. van Calcar has a number of others which bear watching but a most significant one deals with integration. Begun in 1969 as a seven-year project, it ranges from problems of innovation to those of test construction and the evaluation of educational experiments. The importance of the concept of integration is suggested by the title of his cumulative statement of findings, "A Report of Seven Years of Action Between Preprimary and Primary Education by School Advisory Services".

Future Trends

From numerous interviews as well as published sources, the thinking of Dutch educators involved in the kleuterschools appears to be moving in these directions:

1. Parents will continue to demand and receive freedom of choice in the education of their children. This would be limited only to the ability of the state to support financially diverse forms of schooling.

2. The demand for kleuterschool education will continue to increase. From 1960 to 1970 enrollment jumped 23.6% while the four and five-year-old population increased only 4.6%.

3. Pressure will mount to increase the number of facilities for older peuters, children age two to four. Either the entrance age for kleuterschool will be lowered or alternative forms of care will be found.

4. More schools will try the integrated system of schooling under the concept of the "teaching community".

5. Increasing numbers of programs for children age four to six will become more structured with reading and mathematics being offered to five and six-year-olds.

6. More Russian influence will be seen. Russian language will be offered

in Dutch schools along with English, either in the preprimary or early primary years; currently English is taught to older primary children. Increasing attention will be given to the ideas of Russian psychologists such as Gal'perin, El'houin and Zaporozhets by Dutch reseachers. The Haanstra Teacher Training School in Leiden is already introducing their ideas and Dr. Erades, its director, feels that their influence will tend to supercede that of such theorists as Piaget, though he wants his students to continue to study the latter.

7. Dutch educators will continue to be aggressively eclectic, freely adapting the ideas of a wide variety of researchers to the needs of their children. Freedom and eclecticism indeed are the characteristic values of the Dutch and nowhere more so than in their schools.

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